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MANAGEMENT AND CENSORSHIP ISSUES
OF STARS AND STRIPES

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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss two U.S. General Accounting Office reviews of the Stars and Stripes newspapers. We did the first review at the request of this Subcommittee. It involved analyzing the operations and management of the organizations that publish the newspapers. Our report on that analysis described how these organizations could be managed and operated in a more cost-effective manner.¹

We did the second review pursuant to a requirement in the Defense Authorization Act for fiscal years 1988 and 1989. It involved investigating allegations of censorship, news management, and command influence at the Stars and Stripes newspapers. Our report on that investigation described built-in cultural conflicts between the military and the media that led to the allegations. It also contained recommendations for better managing those conflicts.²

BACKGROUND

The Stars and Stripes newspapers are published by separate organizations in Germany and Japan. The two papers are authorized publications of the Department of Defense (DOD), whose policy is

¹GAO/NSIAD-86-104, "STARS AND STRIPES--Appropriated-Fund Support Should Be Reduced," May 1986.

²GAO/NSIAD-89-60, "STARS AND STRIPES--Inherent Conflicts Lead to Allegations of Military Censorship," December 1988.

that a free flow of news and information be provided to all military personnel without censorship and news management.

The papers have a dual mission. The first mission is civic in nature. It is to provide stateside news to help DOD personnel intelligently exercise citizenship responsibilities and to improve morale and readiness. The second mission is military in nature. It is to provide DOD, command, and local news to improve capability for mission accomplishment. According to the Director of the American Forces Information Services, who is responsible for policy oversight of the newspapers, the first mission requires Stars and Stripes to be like a commercial paper that carries news protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. The second mission requires them to be like command newspapers that carry "company" news.

The organizations that publish the Stars and Stripes engage in several revenue-producing activities in order to subsidize the price of the newspapers and to expand and modernize their operations. The largest of these activities is the resale of books and periodicals. Each organization also operates a shop that prints military unit newspapers and does commercial printing for authorized users. In addition, each receives revenues from advertisements placed in their newspapers and some appropriated fund support.

REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS

At the Subcommittee's request, we reviewed the possibility of consolidating the management and operations of the two papers. Interest in consolidation resulted from the papers' substantial increase in appropriated fund support which grew from \$3.7 million in 1977 to about \$9 million in 1984 and because of the financial difficulties experienced by the Pacific paper.

We found that DOD had determined that consolidation was feasible, but had chosen to resolve the financial difficulties in other ways. One of the major alternatives to consolidation that DOD adopted was to authorize the newspapers to use more appropriated fund support. We concluded that the Stars and Stripes organizations are resale and revenue-producing activities (like commissaries and exchanges) and, as such, the amount of appropriated fund support they receive should be minimized. The appropriated fund support to the papers amounted to about \$9 million in fiscal year 1984. We concluded that the need for this support could be reduced or eliminated if management and editorial functions of the two papers were consolidated in the United States. DOD has chosen to maintain the separate entities.

REVIEW OF CENSORSHIP ALLEGATIONS

I would like now to briefly discuss our recent investigation of allegations of censorship and news management by military commanders of Stars and Stripes newspapers. Additional details on the findings from our investigation are included at Attachment I to this statement.

We investigated over 200 allegations and performed an analysis of how the news printed in the Stars and Stripes compared to the wire services' stories they had available to print. We also worked with the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, to make distinctions between routine editorial judgments and censorship.

We found that DOD, through its instructions, intended to provide Stars and Stripes with protection against censorship and command influence, but it has not accomplished this objective. Trying to simultaneously execute the Stars and Stripes dual mission creates an inherent conflict between civilian journalists who must execute the First Amendment mission and commanders who must execute the military mission. Different expectations by these groups are the primary reason allegations of censorship exist.

According to the Society of Professional Journalists, evidence of censorship and inappropriate news management was conclusive at Stars and Stripes in the Pacific but inconclusive for the European

paper. The Society viewed the military editor in chief of the Pacific paper as a loyal public servant struggling to resolve conflicting duties as an officer and editor. We agree with that view and believe that he acted within the authority of the DOD instruction.

We also found that military commanders and their representatives in both theaters have attempted to influence the reporting of news. In addition, we found that the content of the news covered in Stars and Stripes, compared to the wire services from which the news was drawn, was consistent with the allegations we investigated.

We concluded that both DOD missions for Stars and Stripes newspapers individually are worthy pursuits. However, when commingled they create an inherent conflict. The conflict has been exacerbated by the current instruction governing newspapers, which (1) directs that editorial policies should be designed to improve mission execution, rather than to emphasize subjects of interest to the readership, (2) includes a provision widely interpreted as prohibiting investigative reporting, and (3) requires each paper to have an advisory board chaired by a command public affairs officer.

The inherent conflict exists because while one mission is to provide company news, the other mission is to provide news like a newspaper protected by the First Amendment. Because of the

allegations, we focused on the First Amendment mission and believe the execution of this mission can be improved.

We recommended that guidance be issued stating that Stars and Stripes have a civilian editor in chief and a policy that emphasizes subjects of interest to the readership. In addition, we recommended that the guidance state that military officers shall not attempt to influence the news content, that investigative reporting be allowed, and that a content analysis be done periodically to ensure that U.S. troops in two different parts of the world are exposed to approximately the same news from back home.

DOD did not agree that its instruction was the cause of the conflict. It maintained that misunderstandings of the mission definitions by civilian employees of Stars and Stripes were the causes for the conflict. However, DOD stated it intended to begin a year-long review of its policy instruction in December 1988. DOD stated that during this review, it would reevaluate the dual mission and the recommendation for a civilian editor in chief.

DOD stated that its primary goal, as always, is to provide DOD personnel and their families overseas the right to a free press under the provisions of the First Amendment.

Mr. Chairman, although DOD does not believe its dual mission and resulting instruction for Stars and Stripes create problems, we believe they result in the issues and conflicts in both reviews we were asked to do. During our first review, we concluded that the Stars and Stripes organizations were resale and revenue-producing activities and therefore the appropriated fund support to these activities should be minimized. DOD's position is that the newspapers serve a military purpose and therefore should receive needed appropriated fund support.

If Stars and Stripes are to be viewed as command newspapers, carrying news selected and edited by DOD officials, questions arise about the propriety of (1) selling the papers to those who should be receiving command information and (2) carrying advertising that places a government publication in competition with the private sector. In addition, the allegations of censorship by military officials would be without merit. On the other hand, if Stars and Stripes are to be viewed as First Amendment newspapers, they should be allowed to sell advertising, should not receive government subsidies, and should have civilian editors in chief.

It is not realistic to expect Stars and Stripes to have one of these missions to the exclusion of the other. Rather, the inherent conflict needs to be acknowledged and managed by DOD.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared statement and we will be happy to answer any questions.

SUMMARY OF GAO FINDINGS ON CENSORSHIP ALLEGATIONS

We found that DOD attempted to provide Stars and Stripes with additional protection against censorship and command influence in the revised Department of Defense Instruction 5120.4 , "DOD Newspapers and Civilian Enterprise Publications," released in 1984. However, the instruction failed to accomplish that objective because it allowed for stronger military influence in the inherent conflict between the military and the media. In addition, we found that military commanders and their representatives in Europe and the Pacific have attempted to influence the reporting of news. We also found the patterns of news coverage in the Stars and Stripes were consistent with the allegations we investigated.

The Society of Professional Journalists found conclusive evidence of censorship and news management at the Pacific Stars and Stripes, but found the evidence inconclusive for the European Stars and Stripes.

Instruction Added to Inherent Conflicts

The inherent conflicts which exist between the military and the media are institutional and cultural in nature. They result partly from the military's emphasis on control and respect for authority

and the media's emphasis on skepticism and competition in breaking a story.

The current DOD instruction governing newspapers allows for a stronger military influence. For example, the instruction states that editorial policies should be designed to improve the ability of personnel to execute the DOD mission, while the previous instruction stated that these policies should be designed to enhance the knowledge of personnel about subjects of interest to them. In addition, the revised instruction added a provision widely interpreted as prohibiting investigative reporting, although such reporting is common on U.S. newspapers from which civilian journalists have been hired. The instruction also requires an advisory board for each newspaper to be chaired by a public affairs officer and to be responsible for evaluating compliance with DOD and command editorial policies.

Command Influence

Through interviews with current and former employees of the papers, we identified a relatively small number of allegations about command influence at Stars and Stripes in Europe and a much larger number in the Pacific. Most of the allegations in Europe involved external influence on specific stories by commanders and

their public affairs officers who allegedly caused stories to be withheld or who were untimely and unresponsive to reporters' inquiries. Similar allegations were made in the Pacific, as well as allegations that command influence was exerted in management of personnel and that public affairs officials have attempted to influence reporting on subjects sensitive to host nations.

Pattern of News Coverage Suggests Allegations Are Valid

Our analysis of the stories carried by both newspapers and the major wire services identified differences consistent with the allegations of censorship and news management that we were asked to investigate. Both newspapers ran a lower proportion of stories that presented a negative image of DOD than the wire services had carried. The Pacific paper ran a lower proportion of these negative image stories than the European paper. Of the AP and UPI wire service stories on DOD, 47 percent portrayed a negative image of the military. In comparison, 35 percent of the wire services' military stories published in Europe were negative as compared to 27 percent in the Pacific. Moreover, the Pacific paper omitted 86 American dateline AP and UPI stories about DOD that were run in the European paper; 32 of these omissions portrayed a negative image of the military.

Both papers also ran a small percentage of stories on politically sensitive topics identified in the allegations, but the Pacific paper ran fewer of these stories than did the European paper. In comparison to the European paper, the Pacific paper carried about half as many stories on AIDS and strategic subjects, such as the Strategic Defense Initiative, 27 percent fewer stories on the Iran-Contra affair, and about one-third as many stories on the 1988 election campaign.

Society of Professional Journalists' Views

An advisory panel formed by the Society of Professional Journalists reviewed 45 allegations of censorship and news management involving the Pacific paper and 12 allegations involving the European paper. It also reviewed explanations for actions taken, directives on Stars and Stripes, and commented on a draft of our report.

The panel reported that it did not base its findings of censorship and news management at the Pacific paper on one or two or three examples, nor did it make the assertion lightly. The panel viewed the editor of that paper as a loyal public servant struggling to resolve conflicting duties as a military officer and editor. The panel noted that in too many instances the editorial duties lost and added that, as an agent of the government, the editor in chief

has a formal responsibility to uphold the principles of a free press because the DOD policy states that he is specifically forbidden to engage in censorship or news management.